



**THE SPECIAL ASSISTANCE PROGRAM  
A SPEECH BY  
THE HONOURABLE NORMAN LACY, M.P.  
ASSISTANT MINISTER OF EDUCATION  
AT THE OPENING OF THE  
SEMINAR OF SPECIAL ASSISTANCE  
RESOURCE TEACHERS  
AT THE HAWTHORN STATE COLLEGE  
15TH DECEMBER, 1980**

I am extremely pleased that so many Special Assistance Resource Teachers have been able to attend today. I recognise that it is a very busy time of the year, both in schools and in your own family life. However, the fact that we have asked you to come here indicates the importance that we attach to the Special Assistance Program, and to the part you will play in that program.

The Director of Primary Education, Mr Kevin Collins, and the Assistant Director, Mr David Holloway, have enthusiastically backed the concept of Special Assistance Resource Teachers and have worked extremely hard to make the arrangements for this seminar.

The Government of Victoria has taken a quite deliberate attitude to the provision of special assistance for those children who are in need of it. The fundamental premise of that attitude is the recognition of the fact that many children are leaving school without sufficiently developed literacy and numeracy skills.

In an article in the Melbourne 'Sun' on Monday last, Tony Delves, the Director of Adult Education, was quoted as saying:

*"It's astonishing how many people in Victoria are illiterate. I mean people who might have spent 12 years at school and still can't read or write. We get young mothers coming in here whose husbands don't even know they're illiterate. If they're asked to pay a bill or get a driver's licence they manage to bluff their way through somehow."*

This is just one of many statements made by educationists and others within the community that reflect a real concern about illiteracy and innumeracy.

It is quite clear that illiteracy has an oppressive and dehumanising effect on the individual and that the personal and liberating effects of literacy for the individual must never be underestimated.

I know that there is debate in the education community about the definition of illiteracy and I will leave that debate to the professionals.

However, we must ensure that this debate gets pushed far beyond the mere definition of illiteracy. We must ensure that the quality of the debate is such that illiteracy never becomes an accepted part of education structures. It is of tremendous importance that we foster new ideas and creative approaches as well as maintaining an obvious disquiet about the existence of illiteracy.

It is clear that it is no longer necessary to establish a case for the development of programs for the underachiever. That is an accepted and integral part of our education theory. Further, there is no longer any need to establish the existence in the school system of children requiring special assistance. That is now recognised beyond doubt.

The ACER survey into numeracy and literacy estimated that there are still some 15-20 per cent of children completing primary school without having achieved a functional level of literacy.

The Victorian Education Department expressed the following view to the *House of Representatives Select Committee on Specific Learning Difficulties*:

*"There is a steady and constant stream of children, entering State secondary schools, without the necessary communication skills to participate or succeed in a secondary school curriculum. Many schools throughout the State have identified reading and communication problems among their new pupils. Moreover, for many children, these problems do not appear to be overcome by normal secondary curriculum, but linger until the children leave school."*

Progressive improvements such as smaller class sizes and extended courses of teacher training do not appear to have produced commensurate improvements in overall literacy.

The increased resources devoted to support services for schools has not had a sufficiently great impact on the school system.

Many of the public comments on this matter imply a problem within the individual student or the individual teacher. In my view that is unfortunate. It is unfair to concentrate attention on the individual teacher or the individual child in an attempt to account for illiteracy and innumeracy.

A much more constructive approach is to concentrate on an evaluation of the total system of service delivery in an attempt to identify those components that need strengthening and the gaps that need filling. An evaluation of the total system has been the essential prelude to the establishment of the Special Assistance Program. Consequently the Program recognises the importance of the classroom environment in the total development of the child.

The two major objectives of the program are the rationalisation of the support services and the provision of a resource teacher at the school itself.

The Special Assistance Program is designed to maximise the skills of the teacher and the pupil, with minimum disruption to their established relationship. I believe that it is the relationship between pupil and teacher that is the most powerful component in primary education. Services must provide to the classroom teacher assistance which enhances, and builds on, that established relationship. The basis of any service we provide to children with special needs must not be merely the demonstration of a deficiency in either the child or the teacher.

The services of *Counselling, Guidance and Clinical Services* and the *Special Education Units* have been developed with the objective of enhancing the role of the teacher and supporting the activity of the child. Professional Officers and teachers in both Branches have given strong support to the development of the Special Assistance Resource Teacher concept and will have a significant role in your activities as Special Assistance Resource Teachers.

The objectives of the Special Assistance Program, as I have previously outlined them, provide for changes in the organisation of CG & CS and SEU services and these changes will reflect this common philosophy that underlies the activities of both these services.

It is the Government's intention that the services currently being independently offered through these centres and units will be co-ordinated through, and located within, Special Assistance Resource Centres.

The Special Assistance Resource Teacher is the totally new component in the delivery of services to children with special needs. You will have a major on-site responsibility facilitating a productive relationship between parents and pupils and teachers.

The question arises:

Will all this make any difference?

The evidence appears to suggest so.

Firstly, let us look at the rationalisation of the support services. It appeared to me that there was a great need in Victoria for the co-ordination of the wide range of support services which, to many schools, are either unattainable or unrelated. An efficient service should not require a school to "shop around" for the appropriate service.

Often, under this system, the school ends up accepting the first available service rather than the most appropriate service. The senior Department officers responsible for the CG & CS and SEU services have been examining in a Working Party, over the past few months, the rationalisation and co-ordination of the resource services they manage.

I quote from their recent report to me:

*"... the Working, Party believes that for a school requiring services in respect of a child's difficulties there should be a single point of reference to all services in that area."*

and again;

*"The Working Party believes that there is a need to relocate services so that they are readily available to schools ....."*

It is the Government's intention to proceed with the rationalisation of support services and the *White Paper on the Strategies and Structures for Education in Victorian Government Schools* which I presented to the Legislative Assembly last Wednesday provides the framework within which the recommendations of the Working Party can be implemented.

There will be developed a network of Special Assistance Resource Centres which will offer the school a wide range of services on a single referral basis. These services will include psychology, speech therapy, social work and special education. One of your important functions as Special Assistance Resource Teachers will be to inform parents of the services available at these Centres and to facilitate the access of students to these Centres.

Secondly, the concept of resource teacher has met with considerable support over the past ten years.

The *Australian Schools Commission*, in its report for the triennium 1976-78, commented on the need to bring about substantial organisational changes to allow specialist teachers to assist classroom teachers in the satisfaction of individual differences among children.

In 1978 the *Warnock Report* on the United Kingdom's school system suggested that if ordinary schools are to be enabled to take an increasing share in the education of children with special needs they will require support.

An education Working Party established in A.C.T. in 1977 commented:

*"The Resource Teacher Service is regarded by the working party as its most important recommendation as it is the foundation for meeting the special needs of all children."*

In 1979 a Task Force report to the *Victorian State Council for Special Education* suggested that the provision of resource teachers is particularly important not only in a service role to children but also in a preventive function.

Prior to making my recommendations to my Cabinet colleagues on the establishment of The Special Assistance Program I established a committee to advise me on this matter.

This committee acknowledged both the need for a rationalisation of services and a need to develop resources within the school to support the classroom teacher.

The development of your role in the Special Assistance Program is thus a response to an increasing awareness of the special needs of many children within the school system and an increasing demand to meet those needs at the school level.

Your function is quite specific and I am pleased to say that after consultation with the Victorian Teachers' Union and the Victorian Primary Principals' Association there is complete agreement between the Government and those organisations regarding the implementation of the Program for 1981.

It has been agreed that your duties as the teacher responsible for the school's program shall be:

1. To advise and assist teachers in respect to:
  - a. the identification of children in need of special assistance;
  - b. the diagnosis of the learning problems being experienced by such children;
  - c. the prescription of appropriate programs of special assistance which may be necessary to treat such problems;
  - d. the implementation of such programs.
2. To consult with and assist parents in respect to their role in the implementation of any program of special assistance which has been prescribed for their children.
3. To identify and recommend for referral children in need of psychological guidance, speech therapy or other specialist services.
4. To ensure that children needing special assistance continue to participate in appropriate programs throughout their primary school life.

The need to provide the service for which you will be responsible is fully recognised by the Teachers Union and the Principals' Association.

Organisations representing parents and, in particular organisations representing parents of children with special needs, have all expressed support for the Program. Consequently, you will be able to move into your professional activities next year knowing that you will have committed support from all sections of the education community.

Needless to say senior officers of the Education Department will be also supporting you wholeheartedly.

It is recognised that a resource that must be made available to you is in-service training. The details of that training will be given to you later this morning. It was realised right from the very beginning that the in-service training component of this Program would be expensive.

The Acting Director of Teacher Education, Mr Jack Wilson, took up the challenge of organising a program that would meet your needs and would reflect the importance of your task.

I have undertaken to approach the Treasurer to gain a special budget appropriation to meet some of the costs involved in this program. It is planned that Special Assistance Resource Teachers who do not have training in Special Education will be released from school duties for one day a week for 20 weeks to undertake appropriate courses to be provided by tertiary colleges at Melbourne, Burwood, Bendigo and Warrnambool.

I must say that Kevin Collins and David Holloway, at all times, stressed to me the quality of teachers available for this Program through from throughout the state's Primary School system. They encouraged me to approach schools to designate an appropriate person and they represented your professional rights and your professional needs in a manner that could not be bettered. However, appropriate training is crucial to the success of the program. I therefore encourage those who do not have that training to take this opportunity to obtain it. I understand that the course to be provided will consist of a unit that will be able to be counted towards a *Diploma in Special Education*.

Those who participate in this in-service training will be joined by teachers from the Catholic and Independent school systems. The value of the Special Assistance Program is reinforced by the fact that both the catholic system and the independent system have moved with considerable speed to incorporate the program within their systems.

Of course, the total task of adequately meeting the individual pupil differences does not rest with you alone.

It is a matter of high priority in primary education and must be accepted as a total school responsibility. I am sure you can expect the support of the parents of children involved in the Program and must look to them as an important and significant input to the child's educational development.

In many instances it is the parents who are the persons available to the school with the most complete knowledge of the children within its care. That knowledge must not be overlooked and the opinions of the parents, based on that knowledge, must not be disregarded.

The classroom teacher is the person who has the major role in the educational care of the child.

As teachers chosen by your Principals as the SART teacher for your school in 1981, I am sure you share my concern that the introduction of the Special Assistance Program will be successful. I am sure also that you share my hope that through this program there will be provided an opportunity to improve the quality of life for many of our children and in the long term the quality of our society.

I take your presence here today as indicating a commitment on your part to making that hope a reality.

My knowledge of, and experience with, officers of the *Counselling, Guidance and Clinical Services* and the *Special Education Branch* leaves me in no doubt that their commitment will equal yours.

During next year I hope to take the opportunity to visit as many of you as possible and to talk with you first-hand about the Program and its progress.

The Department will begin to evaluate the direction of the Program early next year to ensure that whatever steps that need to be taken to improve it are pursued.

I wish you all great success in this new undertaking and sincerely hope that in a year's time we can all look back on the beginnings of a considerable advancement in the provision of special assistance for children – children who are at risk of leaving primary school with reading and number skills of insufficient standard to give them any prospect of successfully completing their secondary education.